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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 11, 2013

AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION AND FORESTRY

APPROPRIATIONS

BANKING, HOUSING AND URBAN AFFAIRS

VETERANS' AFFAIRS

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack Secretary of Agriculture U.S. Department of Agriculture 1400 Independence Ave., SW Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

Thank you for your letter of March 8, 2013, in response to a letter I sent with my colleagues on February 26, 2013, regarding the impact of sequestration on meat and poultry inspection.

I appreciate you recognizing "that furloughing our food safety inspectors would have harmful consequences for consumers, the economy, the meat and poultry industry, and our workforce." Your letter notes that 80 percent of FSIS funding is dedicated to salaries and benefits. In light of this, you undoubtedly anticipated many months ago the need to prioritize food safety inspectors. Yet, you chose not to request funding flexibility to avoid furloughs.

Your letter states that you "view such furloughs as the last option we would implement" to achieve the required savings. Yet, one of your first options to avoid the furloughs—requesting funding flexibility in the Continuing Resolution—was never pursued. Based on your requests to the Appropriations Committees, you apparently deemed the following priorities more worthy of requests:

- Authority to transfer up to \$10 million from USDA to the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management for rounding up wild horses.
- An additional \$19 million for expenses associated with data collection and processing for the 2012 Census of Agriculture.
- The flexibility to transfer funds between Farm Service Agency and Rural Development to supplement the availability of home loans.
- Providing an additional \$75 million to the Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to ensure benefits are available to all individuals.

It is not my intention to suggest that any of these priorities are unimportant, but why would the Administration have failed to submit a similar request in order to prevent the harmful consequences of furloughing food safety inspectors, as outlined in your letter? This lack of effort seems to suggest that there is no interest in resolving this issue. Instead, it seems that the threat of inspector furloughs is simply part of the Administration's broader messaging efforts to make the sequestration seem as painful as possible. Our country's food safety and the livelihood of our nation's meat producers should not be used as pawns in such a manner.

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I sincerely hope this is not the case, and I would welcome information about any requests you have made to Congress in order to preserve food safety inspections. Clearly, you submitted requests to preserve, and in some cases increase, funding for some USDA priorities; I would appreciate knowing why food safety inspection did not rise to that level.

Sincerely,

Mike Johanns

United States Senator